



# Jokerman

Reading the Lyrics of  
Bob Dylan

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A claim that the self may be bound even at the moment it is speaking up for freedom had formed the substance of Dylan's

protest, in the 1964 'My Back Pages' (*Another Side of Bob Dylan*), at some of his own political verses of the early 1960s. Not that this lyric insists that social and political engagement must be avoided, but rather that guard needs be kept against the fatal falsities of an easy idealism: 'Lies that life is black and white / Spoke from my skull.' Words that violently speak against violence may find themselves only pawns in the game of violence: "Rip down all hate", I screamed.' The self that writes itself in preceptive opposition to precept may find that it has in fact been written according to the rules it would oppose:

In a soldier's stance, I aimed my hand  
At the mongrel dogs who teach  
Fearing not that I'd become my enemy  
In the instant that I preach

Like 'Brownsville Girl', however, 'My Back Pages' reserves a right to unwrite those scripts of the self that seem most entrapping. And numerous Dylan lyrics unreservedly affirm the exfoliating energies of personality: energies of the psyche that can radically throw over limiting structures of the self, whether those structures are thought of as received ones or even as the now inert forms – the socially recuperated forms – of once original expressions of personality. In 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' (*BABH*), for example, the order under which the addressee of the lyric currently lives ('*This sky*') is seen as losing viability:

The empty-handed painter from your streets  
Is drawing crazy patterns on your sheets.  
This sky, too, is folding under you  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

'I held it truth', wrote Tennyson, 'That men may rise on stepping-stones / Of their dead selves. . . .' A metaphor of individual development recalling that in section I of *In Memoriam* is not only doubted but invoked and dismissed in 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'. The lyric envisages a drama in which one pulsion of identity is engaged in disordering nominal certainties of self. The voice of the lyric, recognizing the inevitability of the disordering while acknowledging the pull of faint-heartedness, incites Baby Blue to respond to a call away from the safely plotted course, away from constricting definition by extinct modes of being:

Leave your stepping stones behind, something calls for you.  
Forget the dead you've left, they will not follow you.

And if, in this lyric, dead selves do not rise, neither do their offspring, their productions, retain a living relation with a progenitor. The creative self is no longer intimate with those productions. And they suffer a bereftness and a loss of efficacy as of a fire neutralized in the heat of the sun. A bereftness and an impotence that are unaltered for all that they may be bitterly regretted:

Yonder stands your orphan with his gun,  
Crying like a fire in the sun.

Baby Blue is asked in this lyric to re-embrace a lack of fixture which has been forfeited through a fossilization of attitudes and roles. It is an appeal to re-identify with a principle of identity that refuses settlement and control. It is time for another fire to be started in place of the one which has been defused. The vagabond who emblemizes the call of this principle is one of the troupe of irregular and carnivalesque figures that processes through Dylan's work:

The vagabond who's rapping at your door  
Is standing in the clothes that you once wore.  
Strike another match, go start anew  
And it's all over now, Baby Blue.

Like the empty-handed painter whose street-surrealism unsettles the domestic composure of Baby Blue's sheets, the vagabond is a relation not only of Tambourine Man, of ragged clown, or of Isis herself, but of the 'mystery tramp' of 'Like a Rolling Stone', characterized by the 'vacuum of his eyes'. And as with 'Like a Rolling Stone', 'Mr. Tambourine Man', or 'Isis', there is something disconcerting about the usurpation of the known in 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue'. But again, as with such lyrics, 'It's All Over Now, Baby Blue' tends to emphasize the creative and positive potential of abandonment to spaces of unmapped, unwritten possibility.

The same emphasis is not always to be found in Dylan's lyrics. Not in 'Desolation Row' (*H61*), for instance. The first nine of the ten stanzas of this work orchestrate a series of variations on the theme of the modern world as waste land. It is, in the eighth stanza, a benighted world, where power presides through a sinister indirection and whose presiding powers are directed by ignorance. Its working routines deal in death ('heart-attack machine') and its hierarchy ('castles') in both specious brotherhood ('insurance men') and branding intimidation ('kerosene'):

Now at midnight all the agents  
And the superhuman crew  
Come out and round up everyone  
That knows more than they do  
Then they bring them to the factory  
Where the heart attack machine  
Is strapped across their shoulders

And then the kerosene  
Is brought down from the castles  
By insurance men . . .

In pursuit of its theme 'Desolation Row' recontextualizes – within a modern urban scene – a variety of figures from Western literature, folklore and history. It is via Shakespeare, for example, that in the fourth stanza we hear of the spiritual sterility – amounting to a kind of dementia – induced by the values and practices of secular, mechanistic civilization:

Now Ophelia, she's 'neath the window  
For her I feel so afraid  
On her twenty-second birthday  
She already is an old maid  
To her, death is quite romantic  
She wears an iron vest  
Her profession's her religion  
Her sin is her lifelessness

But the lyric's casting of the inhabitants of the modern world in terms of well-known Western figures and types does not guarantee an affirmation of cultural continuity. At the end of the second stanza, it is not only that Cinderella's disinheritance and drudgery are re-imagined within the violence of the contemporary city. One of the issues raised is whether, in being so relocated, she is dispossessed of – orphaned from – the happy fairy-tale outcome of her original story:

the only sound that's left  
After the ambulances go  
Is Cinderella sweeping up  
On Desolation Row

Comparably, in the fifth stanza, Einstein is displaced from a familiar legend of his life's work. In this stanza the oppression of modern Western culture lies not so much in its capacity to exclude as in its will to include: in its anaesthetizing accommodation of contrasts. A monk here is jealous of Einstein yet fraternizes with him as a friend. The vitality of the disjunction between a traditional religious world view, with its conception of absolutes, and an insurgent scientific, relativistic ideology, is denied. Einstein and *his* false brother the monk participate in a cultural symbiosis which debases even the distinction between love and hate. Removed from his place in a legend of radical theoretical difference Einstein can only pretend to be an outlaw, condemned to the harmless iteration of an approved non-conformity:

Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood  
With his memories in a trunk  
Passed this way an hour ago  
With his friend, a jealous monk  
He looked so immaculately frightful  
As he bummed a cigarette  
Then he went off sniffing drainpipes  
And reciting the alphabet

In the seventh stanza, 'The Phantom of the Opera' appears in 'A perfect image of a priest', a conjunction which sharply images a spiritually disfigured society. The same stanza goes on to witness a disfiguring of the story of Casanova. Here again a threat is contained by assimilation. In the culture of 'Desolation Row' sexual promiscuity is licensed in order that its subversive power be spent:

They're spoonfeeding Casanova  
To get him to feel more assured

Then they'll kill him with self-confidence  
After poisoning him with words

To lose the self through being spoonfed with self. The destructive power of a culture in which anything goes, in which all fables of self are generously tolerated, is captured in the dislocations of story perpetrated in the lyric. Cut off from the integrity of their familiar stories, such characters as Casanova are cut off from their own identities. 'Desolation Row' deals in images of the enclosure of discrete parts of the body. Ophelia 'wears an iron vest'. But there is not only an imagery of mechanical disjunction and entrapment; of being, as it were, locked within a fragmented self. There is also a motif of being locked out of the self. Einstein stands outside his own mind as he stands outside his own recognizable narrative: 'Einstein, disguised as Robin Hood / With his memories in a trunk'.

A crucial image of the devaluation of fables of identity within the wasted and wasting culture of 'Desolation Row' occurs in the lyric's third stanza. In this verse an unreliableness at the root of official appearance is suggested by a Good Samaritan who is distinguished by an attention to his own costume rather than by his concern, as in the Gospel story, for another who has been 'stripped . . . of his raiment':<sup>6</sup>

the Good Samaritan, he's dressing  
He's getting ready for the show  
He's going to the carnival tonight  
On Desolation Row

What is important here, and throughout the lyric, is that the forces of alienation are indistinguishable from the forces of carnival. It is, specifically, a carnivalesque disorder which saturates approved pattern in 'Desolation Row'. And what is most

striking is that that disorder does not bear, as so often in Dylan, a creative aspect. It is itself the source of the negativity which constitutes the waste land. The darkness of unreason which overwhelms all structures and forms in 'Desolation Row' defines no redemptive possibility but only an obscure malignity. The lyric's opening lines present, through a series of absurdist vignettes, a culture's profound confusion of terms:

They're selling postcards of the hanging  
They're painting the passports brown  
The beauty parlor is filled with sailors  
The circus is in town

In the succeeding lines, the circus comes to image a principle of perversion entering social forms but exceeding and mocking any formulation of social authority and control:

Here comes the blind commissioner  
They've got him in a trance  
One hand is tied to the tight-rope walker  
The other is in his pants

The troubled energies of 'Desolation Row' threaten to annihilate the culture they negatively inspire. As one commentator has noted, 'Desolation Row' confronts us 'with recurring hints of imminent disaster'.<sup>7</sup> The tension instinct in the commissioner's delusory holding of balance is confirmed in the image of latent violence – an image reversing official readings of the relationship between order and disorder – offered in the concluding lines of the first stanza:

And the riot squad they're restless  
They need somewhere to go

As Lady and I look out tonight  
From Desolation Row

There is an insinuation of the coming end of all fortunes as, in the third stanza, the firmament itself retires and the teller of fortunes withdraws from business:

Now the moon is almost hidden  
The stars are beginning to hide  
The fortunetelling lady  
Has even taken all her things inside

Ominous hints of the penalty of the fall – the allusion in the third stanza to Cain and Abel, who are left on the street after the fortunetelling lady has retreated, or to Ophelia's gazing upon 'Noah's great Rainbow' in the fourth stanza – heighten the correlation sustained throughout the lyric between the gathering madness of the carnival and the inexorable onset of evening and darkness.

But it is the opening lines of the penultimate stanza that provide the most notable single 'evocation of impending catastrophe':<sup>8</sup>

Praise be to Nero's Neptune  
The Titanic sails at dawn

Thus modern Western culture is imaged as a ship of fools about to go down. Two images of dangerous unreason are conflated here. In the first place this culture is likened to the Titanic as the ship of fools who continued to play and dance even as they were sinking. Secondly, the Neptune that belonged to the careless passengers on the Titanic belongs also to Nero, who fiddled while Rome burned. The end of an unregenerate culture is about to

come in an apocalyptic conflux – realizing the potential of kerosene as an inflammable liquid – of fire and water.

Yet the bleakest element of 'Desolation Row' is that the lyric floats the possibility of a detached, saving perspective on disturbance only to overturn that possibility. Desolation Row itself is, at one level in the lyric, a name for the space where chaos happens and where people are deserted. At the same time, however, the Row stands in the lyric for an outlook that perceives the incoherence. Thus it is that 'Lady and I' in the first stanza look out on a mad world 'From Desolation Row'. In this sense the Row, as a perspective of the mind, might constitute some kind of refuge from insanity. In the eighth stanza, indeed, the powers of oppression seek to prevent escape not *from* but *to* Desolation Row:

insurance men who go  
Check to see that nobody is escaping  
To Desolation Row

As a position of the mind the Row and its insights are evaded by a culture that is rooted in an absurd that bears no regenerative potential. In the penultimate stanza it is an absurdity that already spells, were it but known, an annihilation by flood, a watery death such as has been intimated since the ironic reference to rain in the third stanza ('Everybody is making love / Or else expecting rain'), or since the reference in the fourth verse to Ophelia and the assumed story of her death by water:

The Titanic sails at dawn  
And everybody's shouting  
'Which side are you on?'  
And Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot  
Fighting in the captain's tower

While calypso singers laugh at them  
And fishermen hold flowers  
Between the windows of the sea  
Where lovely mermaids flow  
And nobody has to think too much  
About Desolation Row

In the very last stanza the voice of the lyric alters stance and speaks as if addressing a personal acquaintance who is failing to grasp the crippled ('lame') and crippling nature of the carnival. The image of the unopenable door in the second line suggests that there is no passage back to careless involvement in the carnival once certain insights have been gained:

Yes, I received your letter yesterday  
(About the time the doorknob broke)

All these people that you mention  
Yes, I know them, they're quite lame  
I had to rearrange their faces  
And give them all another name  
Right now I can't read too good  
Don't send me no more letters no  
Not unless you mail them  
From Desolation Row

But occupancy of Desolation Row as a position from which the chaos can be viewed does not emancipate the viewer from horror. The rearrangement of faces and names mentioned in the last stanza describes metafictionally the poetic procedures – the tamperings with character and story – of the preceding nine stanzas themselves. Those tamperings constitute a rewriting of the received forms of stories in an attempt to demonstrate the

essential incoherence of the culture that lives by such stories. The speaker in the last stanza insists on an inability to read the received narratives and asserts that only rewritten versions – versions scripted, like those of this lyric, from desolation's perspective – are acceptable. But the desolating double-bind explored by this lyric is that the rearrangement – the felt necessity to rewrite – can itself stand as a manifestation of the ill pervading the culture rather than a revolutionary act which transcends that ill. The act of fracturing and redistributing – disturbing the surface patterns of approved culture – is indistinguishable in the lyric from the inherent disorder which the act of disturbance sets out to expose. 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins' observes a voice towards the end of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The poetic practices of 'Desolation Row' owe a debt to the work of such as T. S. Eliot. Yet even as the lyric pursues that inheritance it is conscious too of the possible fruitlessness of assuming that ruin may be fought with or healed by ruin. The modernist experiment in disruption emerges in this Dylan lyric as another manifestation of a world shattered inside and out: a manifestation which has no separate status from and no renovative purchase on that world:

Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot  
Fighting in the captain's tower  
While calypso singers laugh at them . . .

'Desolation Row' embraces the Pyrrhicism of its own victory in refusing the illusion of order. The refuge on one side of the door with the broken knob is not free of the disturbed and disturbing valencies which characterize the other side of the door. It may define an insight that is lacking on the blind side but destruction threatens alike those who are carelessly or carefully driven by the energies of the carnival. The problem is subtly anticipated in the

fourth stanza. Here Ophelia is described as looking, in conformity with authorized fables of potential redemption, for a sign of deliverance from death by water. She fixes hopes upon the sign that in Genesis (9:13-17) indicates both the abatement of the flood sent to purge human kind and the beginning of a new Covenant between God and humanity. But whatever the convention that directs her so to look, she is drawn nevertheless to an alternative wisdom that is associated with the perspective from Desolation Row:

Her sin is her lifelessness  
And though her eyes are fixed upon  
Noah's great rainbow  
She spends her time peeking  
Into Desolation Row

The articulation of a wisdom that does not inoculate against the danger of which the wisdom speaks constitutes a whole other side to Dylan's lyrical treatment of potencies that lie beyond common sense. It is an articulation that is often intimate with the apocalyptic tenor of many Dylan lyrics. As early as the 1963 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' (*The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*) the knowledge that the rain will fall does not simply exempt the visionary from submergence:

I'm a-goin back out 'fore the rain starts a-fallin',  
I'll walk to the depths of the deepest black forest,  
Where the people are many and their hands are all empty,  
Where the pellets of poison are flooding their waters,

And I'll tell it and think it and speak it and breath it,  
And reflect it from the mountain so all souls can see it,  
Then I'll stand on the ocean until I start sinkin' . . .

Comparably, 'Desolation Row' identifies no ground to survive the deluge. If Noah's rainbow is hardly believed in, the dawn which the lyric does look forward to is a false one: 'The Titanic sails at dawn'. Desolation Row, *either* as the space where chaos happens *or* as the perspective from which the chaos is grasped, is a desolate place. And it is that place – not some newly covenanted order – that the lyric itself comes to rest in. Unlike the modernist voices of many of Dylan's lyrics the modernist voice of 'Desolation Row' speaks of a crippled condition as a cripple.

The negativity of the energies at play in 'Desolation Row' and the speaker's own implication in that negativity find a parallel – within a narrower focus – in another of Dylan's lyrics to examine the nature of the imaginative principle informing artistic creation. In 'She Belongs to Me' (*BABH*) the darker aspect of daemonic energy – hinted at but not dwelt upon in lyrics such as 'Mr. Tambourine Man' or 'Eternal Circle' – comes markedly to the fore. The first stanza of 'She Belongs to Me' emphasizes the autonomy of the imagination – figured as anima – and sketches its capacity to invert and transvalue the divisions and oppositions upon which the rational self and its world are predicated:

She's got everything she needs,  
She's an artist, she don't look back.  
She can take the dark out of the nighttime  
And paint the daytime black.

The third verse stresses the transcendent scope of imaginative resource, its lack of filiation and its transgressive power:

She never stumbles,  
She's got no place to fall.  
She's nobody's child  
The Law can't touch her at all.



To the extent that such a power may be ritually contained, any mortal feast-day will serve the purpose:

Bow down to her on Sunday,  
Salute her when her birthday comes.  
For Halloween give her a trumpet  
And for Christmas, buy her a drum.

Hallowe'en, of course, may from one point of view be the Eve of All Saints, but from another it is the night of all the witches. And in this lyric, to bow down to 'nobody's child', one who does not really have a day of birth, turns out to be not only a matter of worship but of being spellbound by a dangerous and dessicating power:

She wears an Egyptian ring  
That sparkles before she speaks.  
She's a hypnotist collector,  
You are a walking antique.

The local transgressions incited by the imagination's transcendence turn out to be performed in thrall of a cruel and disabling authority:

You will start out standing  
Proud to steal her anything she sees.  
But you will wind up peeking through her keyhole  
Down upon your knees.

The irony of the lyric's title is founded in recognition that the imagination is not owned by the ordinary self: 'She' does not belong to 'me', but the other way around.

Thralldom to menacing potencies of the psyche that draw their

power from without the socialized self is again the subject of the 1978 'New Pony' (SL). The image of the horse in this lyric is at one level a figure of the inner drive and life of the psyche. It is indeed a type of anima-figure. But it is the anima in its direst aspect. No elusive spirit, she appears here as a token of primal instinctive energy. And the opening line of the lyric baldly associates this energy with a fallen principle: 'Once I had a pony, her name was Lucifer.' Not that the lyric asserts that this principle has been exorcized. The 'new pony' of the lyric's title is a reincarnation of the old one. In the third stanza, beneath whatever formal refinements that are affected by the new pony, reside not merely libidinal force but satyric, diabolic features:

I got a new pony, she knows how to fox-trot, lope and pace

She got great big hind legs  
And long black shaggy hair above her face.

The images of old and new ponies in 'New Pony' are images of the presence and unavoidable resurgence of a noxious power within the self. And when in the fourth stanza the speaker shifts into addressing directly his own other, darkest self, he is addressing not only the peccant force represented by the new pony, but the satanic principle first figured in terms of the pony named Lucifer. For Lucifer both as the morning star and the archangel fallen from light is at the heart of this self-reflexive address:

It was early in the mornin', I seen your shadow in the door  
Now, I don't have to ask nobody  
I know what you come here for

Continuing this address in the fifth verse the speaker registers the unmanageable compulsions of his own shadowy self and